

Information **UPDATE**

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction/John T. Benson, State Superintendent/125 S. Webster St./P.O. Box 7841/ Madison, WI 53707-7841

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TO: District Administrators, CESA Administrators, CCDEB Administrators,
Directors of Special Education and Pupil Services, and Other Interested Parties

FROM: Juanita S. Pawlisch, Ph.D., Assistant Superintendent
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SUBJECT: Wisconsin Statewide Parent-Educator Initiative (WSPEI)

Increasing the involvement of parents in the education of their children is a national goal in both general and special education. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act states that “every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children.” The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 strengthen the role of parents of children with disabilities and ensure that families have meaningful opportunities to participate in their children’s education. Behind these federal laws is a gradual but major paradigm shift in improving educational results for children: parents and families are pivotal to children’s learning and must be partners with schools in educational decision making.

IDEA promotes school and family partnerships by ensuring that parents have the opportunity to participate equally in Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams. Equal participation means having sufficient information to participate in a meaningful way. It also means having the opportunity to take part in any meetings about their child’s identification, evaluation, and educational placement as a child with a disability, and any meetings about the provision of a free appropriate public education to their child. Wisconsin law ensures equal participation of parents on IEP teams and goes a step farther by ensuring parents the opportunity to participate in the development and review of the school district’s Special Education Plan for all children with disabilities. The law also requires school districts to evaluate parents’ general satisfaction with special education and related services in the district and report that information in the Special Education Plan, a public document.

Many Wisconsin schools embraced partnerships with parents of children with disabilities long before the passage of these laws, recognizing the benefits of working together toward a common goal. Several school districts and CESAs established projects, initially funded by the department, to improve information dissemination, mutual understanding, and positive conflict resolution among local families and educators. The creative strategies employed by these local education agencies and their resident parents were brought together for the first time in networking meetings during the 1999-2000 school year. The favorable response to this statewide sharing of information, coupled with the need expressed by more school districts and parents of children with disabilities to find ways of fostering positive working relationships that support children’s learning, led the department to develop the Wisconsin Statewide Parent-Educator Initiative (WSPEI).

WSPEI is founded on five areas of partnership:

- (1) **Alignment with and access to state and federal initiatives** that promote educational accountability and parent participation in education and child health, for example IDEA Partnerships, Children with Special Health Care Needs Resource Centers (CSHCNC), IDEA State Improvement Plan, and United States Department of Education Continuous Improvement Monitoring.
- (2) **Information exchange and referral** to other public and private agencies and organizations in Wisconsin that have similar objectives of supporting parent involvement in education and child health, and positive relationships among parents and educators. The WSPEI advisory committee includes representatives of the Parent Education Project (PEP); the Native American Family Empowerment Center (NAFEC); the Family Assistance Center for Education, Training and Support (FACETS); the Goals 2000-funded parent training organization, Parents Plus; the University of Wisconsin Waisman Center; the Long-Term Care Redesign initiative; and one of the five CSHCNC.
- (3) **Collaboration with the Family-Community-School Partnership (FCSP) team** within the department to model partnerships between general education and special education in supporting family involvement in schools that is compatible with various learning styles, cultures, and other family responsibilities.
- (4) **Collaboration with the twelve Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs)** to assess the needs of the districts in their regions and offer to parents and educators statewide training, mentoring, networking, and dissemination of exemplary materials about parent involvement in the education of children with disabilities.
- (5) **Support and leadership for local school districts** to promote positive, reciprocal communication between school personnel and families and enable all parents of children with disabilities to participate meaningfully on IEP teams and in school advisory functions.

Beginning July 17, 2000, WSPEI now offers a toll-free number (1-877-844-4925). Parents and school districts who are seeking information, referral to other agencies, help in finding or developing training or materials, assistance with the development of parent and educator advisory groups, mentoring for parent liaisons within districts or CESAs, or other assistance related to parents and special education can call WSPEI. The project coordinators, Mary Skadahl, Lisa Young, and Barbara Breen, are all experienced parent trainers and liaisons and will respond to requests. It is not WSPEI's goal to replace or reinvent existing resources, or to provide funding or individual advocates at IEP meetings. Its goal is to help parents and school districts find or create the resources that will help them foster positive working relationships that support shared decision making and children's learning. It is also WSPEI's goal to promote increased dissemination of information among parents, schools, projects, organizations and agencies through networking meetings, conferences, and other means. To help accomplish these goals, the department also added a Special Education Team position that is dedicated to advancing parent involvement in special education and enhancing partnerships among schools, families, and communities on behalf of children with disabilities.

The department website at www.dpi.state.wi.us now includes a WSPEI page. It can be reached from the home page (Of Interest to Families), through the Special Education Team page, or through the Bright Beginnings/Family-Community-School Partnerships Team page. The WSPEI page includes an explanation of the initiative, linkages to other relevant sites within the department website, and linkages to other Internet resources for families and individuals with disabilities. Among the information that can be found on this page are materials developed by the department and its partners, such as the sample parents' rights brochure in English, Spanish, and Hmong and an Introduction to Special Education for parents (in press). The page also includes a list of the CESA parent liaisons, how to contact them, and linkages to each CESA parent page. A calendar of workshops, meetings, and trainings of interest to parents of children with disabilities is included as well.

WSPEI will offer Parents in Partnership training to a total of 75 parents of children with disabilities in each of three regions of the state. The participants will attend five weekend sessions from October through May. Through this training parents will expand their knowledge of IDEA and other educational issues, develop leadership skills, explore ways to improve parent-professional partnerships, and increase their resource network. Parents in Partnership offers parents an opportunity to examine local and statewide systems for children with disabilities and make a commitment to action in their own communities. There is no cost to attend, and a stipend is available to offset some childcare costs.

WSPEI is collecting and reviewing data to guide its activities and focus. These include a basic profile of parent involvement activities in school districts, information on parent satisfaction and involvement from Special Education Plans, issues that parents raise in complaints, due process hearings and onsite monitoring, and the attendance of parents of children with disabilities at statewide and regional conferences. A study relating to the effectiveness of parent training programs in Wisconsin has been conducted in collaboration with the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin. Analysis of this study will continue, and the results will be used to guide future training opportunities for parents. Although the initiative centers on parents of children with disabilities in education, an integrated approach that recognizes fundamental issues of families in education as well as health care issues of children is essential to improving educational outcomes for all children.

Questions regarding this bulletin can be directed to Patricia Bober, Parent Involvement Consultant, Special Education Team, Department of Public Instruction, 125 South Webster Street, P.O. Box 7841, Madison, WI 53707-7841, (608) 266-5194.

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This information update can also be accessed through the Internet:
<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlsea/een/bulindex.html>